

Review Article

Early Modern Women

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Sara Mandelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England, 1550–1720*, Clarendon Press, 1998, pp. xvi + 480, £40, pb. £14.99; Kathleen E. McLuskie (ed.), *Plays on Women*, Revels Student Editions, Manchester University Press, 1999, pp. 416, £45, £9.99 pb; Diana O'Hara, *Courtship and Constraint: Rethinking the Making of Marriage in Tudor England*, Manchester University Press, 2000, pp. xii + 276, £49.99, £16.99 pb; Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England: Unbridled Speech*, Macmillan Press, 1999, pp. ix + 276, £55.

The four books reviewed here represent a significant intellectual contribution to our understanding of women and their construction in early modern England. Despite the great upsurge in interest in the study of women and gender, there are still surprisingly few general books on the lives of women in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Mandelson and Crawford's work is undoubtedly one of the best. Both authors have a considerable track record in publishing works on women in the period and here they cast their expertise over a wide and fertile ground. This is a joint project, which was first mooted in the early 1980s and the authors acknowledge that 'an entire interdisciplinary field has matured along with' their book. The result is an excellent and highly accessible introduction, not only to the topic of women's lives in the long seventeenth century, but also to the multi-faceted research that has underpinned these new areas of study. The authors have made a point of using not just the familiar evidence of the lives of elite women, but also more obscure evidence about the non-elite, thus allowing them to focus as much

as possible on plebeian women. As a result the issues of both gender and class are skillfully interwoven throughout the book. As an antidote to earlier histories, which have relegated female lives to the 'historical scrap-heap', the authors have also tried to privilege women's words in order to explore women's perceptions of their own experiences.

The book starts with an analysis of discourses about women and gender, subsequent chapters follow the female life cycle and investigate female culture, work and politics. Topics which have been covered extensively in the literature, such as witchcraft and radical religion, are treated here briefly in order to pursue the less well known. Of particular value is the chapter on female culture, which brilliantly challenges the assumptions of male historians that women did not have a separate culture or system of shared meanings. By investigating female space, speech, material culture, piety, friendship, same-sex relationships, and the early feminist theorists, Mendelson and Crawford demonstrate the complexities of a specifically female culture, which was rich in social meanings. Similarly, the two chapters on work provide significant new insights into the economic activities of early modern women. The labouring poor are revealed as chronically underemployed and single poor women were especially vulnerable in the light of contemporary assumptions about the 'family economy', which was expected to support all of its members. Higher up the social scale, however, there were both gainers and losers. Women were more in demand as teachers and governesses as female literacy increased, but in midwifery and health care they faced increasing restrictions and lost ground to the encroachments of male professionals. There were also signs that paid work was becoming taboo for the women of the élite classes. The final chapter investigates women's political activities from the four Tudor and Stuart queens regnant down to the political agitation of women involved in demonstrations against high food prices, industrial and trade issues or religious and political concerns, particularly during the upheaval of the 1640s and 1650s. In contrast to traditional historical narratives, which see the early modern period as a time of dramatic transformations, the authors conclude that the experiences of women were very different from those of men. The changes contingent on the growth of capitalism made little impact on the working lives of poorer women, but by the end of the seventeenth century new more democratic concepts of the political rights of men had begun to exclude élite women, who had previously been able to claim political privileges through their lineage and wealth. Above all the gender order remained remarkably stable and able to respond to change, in order to maintain the subordination of women within the new emergent political and economic framework that was evident by the late seventeenth century.

Women in Early Modern England provides a fine starting point for the reading of Kate McLuskie's *Plays on Women*, a scholarly critical edition of four plays performed in the London theatres between 1592 and 1613. The plays are Middleton, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, Middleton and Dekker,

The Roaring Girl, anonymous, *Arden of Faversham* and Heywood, *A Woman Killed with Kindness*. McLuskie provides a sparkling introduction to this selection, in which she emphasises that early modern drama is 'centrally concerned with the cultural and social role of women'. She draws widely on recent important work by feminist scholars including Jean Howard, Frances Dolan and Laura Gowing, as well as historians of London such as Ian Archer and Jeremy Boulton, and the work of G. K. Hunter and others on the context of the early English theatre. McLuskie not only analyses the role of gender relations within the plays, but also provides information on the authors, the playing companies, and the original staging. The selected plays represent the new dramatic genres of city comedy and domestic tragedy. They provide an insight into the connections between the drama, which had not yet settled into the formulaic, and the social world in which the plays were produced. McLuskie highlights the fact that the plays deal with traditional constructions of male and female honour, which had not yet given way to a market orientated and crude opposition between true love or friendship and money. City comedies tended to subordinate women to the competition between men for status and power, but *The Roaring Girl* is innovatory in placing the cross-dressing figure of Moll Frith at the centre of the action. Moll is constructed as an hermaphrodite, who is able to move effortlessly between the world of women and the world of men, whilst simultaneously challenging the gender order. In contrast, the domestic tragedies show how competitive forces between men and female transgressions of the gender order result in explosive violence and death. McLuskie also provides an excellent and scholarly gloss on the texts, which elucidates the comic and dramatic potential of the language and style of the authors. McLuskie is particularly strong on the bawdy element in the language, highlighting *double entendres* and the mandatory risqué misconstructions of Latin by the unlearned characters in the plays. Whilst the plays offer comic and tragic stories for the entertainment of their audiences, they also provide an insight into early modern constructions of men and women and their relationships. The stories told by characters in the plays can be understood in terms of the generic literary conventions of the day, but as McLuskie emphasises they should also be read against stories told in real life situations, such as the cases heard in the church courts concerning defamation and adultery.

This last point is amply illustrated in Diana O'Hara's *Courtship and Constraint*, which traces the process of courtship in the sixteenth century largely through the church court records of the diocese of Canterbury. O'Hara's detailed study complements work on marriage and sexual relations based on the diocesan records from other regions by Ingram, Houlbrooke, and Gowing amongst others. O'Hara specifically focuses, however, on the process of courtship. This is a topic, which has been largely ignored by other historians, but which she demonstrates 'generated a rich cultural tradition among the populace'. Most of her sources come from testimonies given in

marriage contract disputes, which might be criticised for yielding evidence only in cases where courtship did not lead to marriage. O'Hara is alert to this pitfall and argues cogently that such cases nevertheless reveal the normative expectations surrounding marriage negotiations. These sources are supplemented by testimonies from 'divorce', defamation and testamentary cases. Together this evidence allows her to consider the middling ranks of society, those who were neither the very rich nor the very poor, the two groups which did not generally have recourse to these courts. O'Hara's findings convincingly challenge traditional models of marriage formation, particularly those set out in the work of Lawrence Stone and the responses to it. While Stone is criticised by O'Hara for being overly-schematic and for over-emphasising change in the family structures of the upper classes, his critics come under fire for assuming that there was greater informality and freedom amongst the lower orders in their choice of marriage partners. O'Hara argues that a straightforward dichotomy between forced marriage and freedom of choice is far too simplistic and that for the middling sort the interlocking concerns of kinship, property, and social propriety created a network of customs and constraint around the choice of marriage partners. Indeed O'Hara finds that the giving of dowries was by no means restricted to the social élite and that the fundamental concern of courting couples was for 'material considerations rather than personal attributes'. O'Hara has also detected some change over time in dowry sizes, marriage age thresholds and the geographical range of courtship, but concludes that the 'culture of courtship' remained remarkably unchanged throughout the sixteenth century. That culture was imbued with a certain degree of formality and included the use of go-betweens, the giving of gifts and tokens at appropriate times and places, the influence of family and friends, and traditional procedures of courtship and dowry negotiation. Drawing on the work of anthropologists, O'Hara is able to demonstrate the centrality of the wider kinship and community networks in the process of marriage formation. She argues that kin and community still mattered in the sixteenth century and that a variety of groups, not just immediate kin, could influence the choices made by couples embarking on marriage.

The darker side of relations between the sexes is explored in Jocelyn Catty, *Writing Rape, Writing Women in Early Modern England*, the first comprehensive study of the depiction of rape in the literature of early modern England. Catty divides her work into two distinct halves, the first exploring the issue of rape as handled by male writers in a variety of literary genres, including fiction, poetry and drama; the second exploring the work of individual female writers on the same subject, including Jane Lumley, Mary Sidney, Elizabeth Cary, and Mary Wroth. While rape could be read as a political allegory or as a crime against other men, Catty concentrates on a literal reading in order to explore the sexual ideologies

of the period. Rape, Catty reminds us, could signify the abduction of a woman from her father or husband, as well as denoting sexual assault. In the early modern period the meaning was in transition between these two constructions and this underlines the ways in which rape was used as a literary device to explore the power dynamic between men and women. Catty's study reinforces many of the themes to be found in the other works reviewed here. In particular, writing about rape in the early modern period exposed ambiguities and fears about notions of female chastity and honour. A raped woman was perceived by many male writers as compliant with her own violation. Female beauty was described as a lure, which tempted men to rape, while the belief that it was impossible to rape a woman without her consent was implicit in many texts. The story of Lucrece was thus used to suggest that a woman who did not commit suicide to avoid rape or after ravishment was to some extent guilty of volition. A violated woman could also be regarded as 'unchaste' regardless of her own attitude towards her rape, there was thus a considerable blurring of the boundaries between rape and seduction. Male writers also used rape as a form of voyeurism and even as a source of comedy. In contrast female writers were more concerned with modes of female resistance and used rape to explore the links between 'women's sexual autonomy and their autonomy in language'. Women's speech and writing were contested areas in the period, which could be linked with a lack of chastity. The very act of writing thus became a form of resistance to male power. Thus Mary Wroth challenged the idea that a woman's sexual resistance was based on her desire for chastity rather than on her own sexual choice and other female writers identified with mythical figures such as Philomela, who narrates her story of rape through weaving after her tongue has been cut out. By combining her study of women's writing about rape with that of men, Catty does much more than offer a simple comparison between the two, she also shows how female writers were able to use the image of rape and its attendant interpretations and stories as a powerful way of justifying their own writing. Taken together the four books reviewed here throw new light on a variety of themes related to the lives of women and gender relations in the early modern period. They also illustrate the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to the subject.

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